

## Badiou: The Grace of the Universal

### Eric Alliez

The book by Alain Badiou dedicated to his “non-relationship” with Deleuze is followed by a *Saint Paul*, subtitled *The Foundation of Universalism*, and, forming a series with the latter work, a collection of interventions around the political, *Abrégé de Métapolitique*, which defines its collective efficacy as “principally universal” [*principiellement universelle*].<sup>1</sup> In an article submitted to the journal *Multitudes* following the harsh controversy elicited by his book on Deleuze, Badiou himself seems to indicate that there is more than a simple chronological succession here, that one must consider this political sequence *with his Deleuze as its starting point* and as constantly positioned *vis-à-vis Deleuze*.<sup>2</sup>

Above all, it is the following passage that one must read as a *warning*: “Our quarrel can be formulated in a number of ways. ... For example: how is it that, for Deleuze, politics is not an autonomous form of thought, a singular section of the chaos, one that differs from art, science, and philosophy? This point alone bears witness to our divergence, and there is a sense in which everything can be said to follow from it.”<sup>3</sup> This divergence—let us note immediately—is founded on a shared rejection of “political philosophy,” as well as of an ethics subordinated to the consensual legislation of the universal human Subject, which would confer upon public opinion a kind of transcendental legitimacy (the democracy of “common sense”). Focusing on “this concession to the One that undoes the multiple’s fundamental radicalness, whose guarantee one had tried to secure”<sup>4</sup> (the attack is Badiou’s, but its parameters are equally Deleuzian), Badiou highlights the immediately political character of their shared conviction according to which “all true thought is a thought of singularities.” As one might expect, however, this political character will also, just as immediately and contradictorily, define the “non-relationship” to Deleuze: it will do so at its point of greatest *generic* proximity, inasmuch as Deleuze was “the first” to “properly grasp that a contemporary metaphysics must consist in a theory of multiplicities and an embrace of singularities”;<sup>5</sup> and also along its most *specific* dividing line, which registers the political question under the condition of an ontology that is indissociably abstract and concrete, when it is a matter of resolving, *for Badiou and against a Deleuze that is now entirely Other and not at all Intimate*, “the problem that defines contemporary philosophy: what exactly is a universal singularity?”<sup>6</sup> That is the last sentence of the article, preceded by this one, which remains mysterious in its militant consequences, for the one who will ignore the Pauline re-foundation of the universal proposed by Badiou: “the only power that can be attuned to the power of being is that of the letter.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [For a list of Badiou’s principal texts and their corresponding abbreviations, see the introduction to this issue.—Ed.]

<sup>2</sup> The article in question is Badiou’s “Un, multiple, multiplicité(s),” *Multitudes* 1 (2000): 195–211. [Translated as “One, Multiple, Multiplicities” in TW 67–80.] This article was part of a Badiou / Deleuze debate that I opened up, with additional interventions by José Gil and d’Arnaud Villani, in the last number of *Futur Antérieur* (43 [1998]).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 196/68.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Badiou, “Contre la ‘philosophie politique,’” in AM 19–34.

<sup>5</sup> Badiou, “Un, multiple, multiplicité(s),” 196/67.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 211/80.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

A letter whose line we had to reproduce in order to recall the montage of Badiou's *dispositif*: such as it is presents itself and such as we seek to test it in the following all-too-brief notes.

*First (Theorematic) Point*

*On the general political meaning of the Badiou/Deleuze coupling*

Deleuze and Badiou conceive of ontology only qua *politics of being*, and they regard this stance as a fundamental requirement of contemporary thought. Thus, if it is not unfounded to posit their respective metaphysics as the two extreme, and absolutely hostile, poles which nevertheless constitute the contemporary philosophical field in its materialist necessity,<sup>8</sup> it won't be so much a question of political consequentiality and verification (what does "politically" mean, for the one and the other?), but rather of a *radical antecedence of politics tied to their respective metaphysics*.

So that this radical anteriority only *really* allows itself to be formulated in terms of a *precedent*, in terms of a constant, political antagonism, the apparent suspension of which is the condition of Deleuze's writing, and its reactivation the occasion for the *Saint Paul*.

*Second (Recitative) Point*

*On the historico-political sublation of political precedent*

Badiou's *Deleuze* opens with the primal scene of the Vincennes years, setting against one another the "Maoist" and the inspiration behind the "anarcho-desirers," an "enemy all the more formidable for being internal to the 'movement'" (De 2). Nothing (or almost nothing) is lacking in this description: an intervention brigade, an attempt to seize control over the direction of the department, a furious article with an eloquent title ("The Flux and the Party"),<sup>9</sup> etc., concluding with the double public condemnation: "'Bolshevik' versus 'fascist': what a fine pair we made [*nous voilà bien!*]" (De 2). And things in effect took a rather bad turn on the side of the Party, which deemed "fascist" the anti-dialectical theory of flux and Deleuze's apologia for the new "spaces of liberty"—thus throwing confusion into "his philosophy of life and of the natural One-All." But then—unlike Lardreau, who pushes the attack all the way to the ultimate and *politically primary* reasons for Deleuze's Bergsonism (if I have understood correctly: *a Mitterandism avant la lettre*)<sup>10</sup>—Badiou suddenly shifts register, in order to leave the quarrel behind.

Because with the "winter years" there comes the time for the sublation of conflict in History, when the counter-revolution announced by the *nouveaux philosophes* and realized by the new-Kantians displaces and overturns the alliances of thought. With the former being philosophically worthless and the latter having placed themselves outside of non-academic philosophy with their constant shuttling between Republicans and Liberals, it is truly, according to all available evidence, the change in political parameters that authorizes, at Badiou's initiative, "a period of truly sustained theoretical discussion" (De 5) with Deleuze.

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<sup>8</sup> I have developed this proposition in *De l'impossibilité de la phénoménologie: Sur la philosophie française contemporaine* (Paris: Vrin, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> ["Le flux et le parti: dans les marges de L'Anti-Oedipe," in Alain Badiou and Sylvain Lazarus, eds., *La Situation actuelle sur le front philosophique, Cahiers Yenan* no. 4 (Paris: Maspero, 1976): 24-41, translated into English by Laura Balladur and Simon Krysl, with commentary by Bruno Bosteels, in *Polygraph* 15/16 (2004).—Tr.]

<sup>10</sup> Guy Lardreau, *L'exercice différé de la philosophie: A l'occasion de Deleuze*, (Lagrasse, France: Verdier, 1999).

Except that this cannot be pursued, from the standpoint of the Decision, without the prospect of an entirely different sublation, which is philosophically determinant in a wholly other way: sublation of the convergent perspective of the work with Félix Guattari into a divergent or contrasting collaboration. This philosophical *forcing*, which would be able to extract Deleuze from the anarchic confusion of the world—from the “democracy of desire” that is coextensive with this confusion in the master as well as the “vitalist terrorism” of his disciples ... in order to reestablish the truth of Deleuzism, if necessary, *against* Deleuze himself.<sup>11</sup>

“Contrary to the commonly accepted image (Deleuze as liberating the anarchic multiple of desires and errant drifts), contrary even to the apparent indications of his work that play on the opposition multiple/multiplicities ...” (De 11). Whence the very peculiar image of Deleuze as Metaphysician of the One, *Platonist in spite of himself, whose contradictory truth* (a Platonism of the virtual) *is only intelligible through and in the philosophy of Badiou*. Dialectics would force us, then, into the Decision of a Platonism of the multiple, or *set theory [ensemblistique]*, posited as the authentic Platonism and the sole materialism consistent with the truth of the separation from the world.<sup>12</sup>

The only thing that matters here is that this question of multiplicities is always carried in Deleuze by an *infra-* or *micropolitical* principle (to articulate the opposite of metapolitics) that is systematically evacuated by the Commentator, together with the works cosigned ‘Deleuze-Guattari’ which nevertheless confront, on this very basis, the question of “*becoming-revolutionary*.” *Because*—as they affirmed ever since *Anti-Oedipus*—*multiplicities must not only be declared, or described, they must also be made, to the extent that the differentiating opening of life must, each and every time, be actualized in an immanent construction of fluxes* (or an assemblage: always collective, always determined) *which, qua desiring production, is the social power of difference*. It is in light of this *molecular revolution*, which is combined [*conjugue*] with the cosmic by positing the intensification of life as the only criterion, that there is not, *de jure*, a separate political sphere, that “Everything is politics” [*Tout est politique*]*—even when the production of singularity is made to fall back on unity with the Signifier taking control of a concrete assemblage ... Everything is politics because there is no unassembled desire, because desire is the effective operator of assemblage, and because there are only politics of assemblages on a plane of immanence or of composition that must itself be constructed.*

Deleuzian politics thereby mobilizes the *process of rhizomatic subjectivation* of his entire philosophy. It is thus that Deleuze re-commences his philosophy with Guattari (see the *Dialogues* with Claire Parnet and *Pourparlers*<sup>13</sup>) according to the principle of a double-articulation:

- The expression (of the world) without construction (of assemblages) is blind: this is *exactly* the “natural mysticism” denounced by Badiou under the name of Deleuze (*the unthought of Deleuze*, or a bland and cobbled-together Deleuzism—at any rate a metaphorizing Romanticism in the guise of the Last Phenomenology).

<sup>11</sup> [In this sentence and throughout, ellipses are the author’s.—Tr.]

<sup>12</sup> See the dossier Badiou/Deleuze presented in *Futur antérieur* 43.

<sup>13</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), available in English translation by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers, 1972–1990* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1990), translated by Martin Joughin as *Negotiations, 1972–1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

- Construction without expression is empty [*vide*]: this is *exactly* the mathematical ontology of Alain Badiou, naming the void as multiple (as the basis of an axiomatic), declaring the *indifference* of truth to the world (the construction of eternal truths) in the “offering of the event” as the *grace of nomination* (the Great Logic of the Signifier).

Borne by the Deleuzian question par excellence, that of *becoming*, one must think that the forces of becomings operate a “double capture” between the two terms as that which passes (happens) between them [*ce qui (se) passent entre eux*], realizing their mutual heterogenesis in a *mode of life*. Because a mode of life is “expression” only to the extent that it is “construction.” Life-experiment, as Deleuze says.

This would allow us to grasp:

- The initiation of the epistolary protocol with Alain Badiou—because contemporary philosophy is the constructivism of multiplicities at their point of greatest singularity: after *A Thousand Plateaus* dedicated to “multiplicities themselves,” comes the time of the question *What is philosophy?*, the last address, cosigned with Guattari, and, with it, the time of the ontopolitical confrontation regarding *the problem of construction*.
- The brutal cessation imposed by Deleuze if *Badiou’s unthought* comes down to the equation CONSTRUCTION = EXPRESSION = BECOMINGS, condemning the Other to inconsistency in the guise of the void.

### *Third (Constatative) Point*

*On the question of the universal under the condition of the most contemporary politics.*

“Universal singularity” articulates the metapolitical form of construction separated from all the world’s differences of expression, “*absented*” from the *infinite multiple of differences that truth deposes in its singular emergence* [surrection]. A singular surge, truth as such is, in perfect Platonic observance, “*indifferent to differences*”; therefore, it is immediately universalizable *in the historical mode of politics* as a rule for its intrinsically universal prescription: to produce some 1 by abolishing the infinity of differences in the “figure [*chiffre*] of the same and of equality” (E 27).<sup>14</sup>

Founding the truth of politics on a politics of truth, the (re)foundation of universalism by Badiou delivers the “purest” version of it *because it is the most classic version* (in the Jacobin sense), but *the most contemporary version as well*, in the radicalness of the distance to the void that this truth measures (a Jacobinism of the postmodern age). Refusing the logical plane of cases of the individual subordinated to the State through the law, this (re)foundation summons the singular infinity of the situation in order to reduce it to the collective-universalizable One which—unless one ties oneself to the identitarian-minoritarian expression of differences—can be authorized only *through the self-proclamation of the event by the subject-without-identity that names it*. It is, above and beyond the fable it constitutes, the Christ-event “whose only ‘proof’ lies precisely in its having been declared by a subject” (SPe 5): resuscitated *for all*. Evental One, universal One.

What is key here is not so much the outcome of the rigorous alternative to Deleuze and to “Deleuzism” (immediately brought together, as they should be, in the controversy) but rather the prescriptive character of this universalism of the Subject-of-Truth, stated by

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<sup>14</sup> See also AM 166.

Badiou *for all those* who aspire to destroy *the leftism [gauchisme] of the party of desire* (as Lardreau, in perfect fidelity to the other party, says, and I quote: “[A party] of lack, of the One, of knowledge [savoir], of war.”<sup>15</sup> Prescriptive *because the universal is itself the truth of the subject who pronounces the void of being*—from which Badiou, *in immanence*, knows how to draw out the consequences. After *Deleuze*, it is no surprise that the militant objective of the *Saint Paul* is to unfold the logic of rupture with the movement of vitalist affirmation *by showing the inconsistency of becoming in regard to the excess of the Real over reality*. This cannot be grasped except through Lacan, who posits the real in the predication of the “no” as intervention-subject.

Founder of the figure of the militant, “*Paul’s unprecedented gesture consists in subtracting truth from the communitarian grasp*” (SPe 5). How extraordinarily contemporary is Paul! Because, in introducing the *for all*, the rupture of universal singularity with regard to the *identitarian singularity* of a closed subset is devoid of alternatives, save for the present communitarianization of public space, fragmented into closed identities that offer so many new territories to the market. This (strangely?) cannot be written without inviting Deleuze to the marriage between capitalist logic and identitarian logic, a marriage where what is at stake is precisely the denial of emancipatory reality to any becoming-minor—Deleuze says it “exactly”: “capitalist deterritorialization requires a *constant* reterritorialization” (SPe 10). This is a completely nominal exactitude, a misprision [*contresens*], since the thwarted deterritorialization of capitalism no longer exerts its influence upon an *absolute* form of deterritorialization that mobilizes *otherwise* relative forms, and since *becoming* is no longer the business of fluxes of desire liberated by capital, but the occasion for the “mercantile investments” to which capital gives rise ... But isn’t this point of view precisely the point of view of capital? For we know that *a becoming that has been reduced to the primitive accumulation of reterritorializations* is no longer Capitalism and Schizophrenia—it is Capitalism and Paranoia ... I quote Badiou, from the same page: “What *inexhaustible potential* for mercantile investments in this upsurge—taking the form of communities demanding recognition and *so-called cultural singularities*—of women, homosexuals, the disabled, Arabs” (SPe 10, emphasis mine). Let us recall that Deleuze-Guattari’s question is that of *a revolutionary ontology of* (“nearly imperceptible”) *becomings* that never cease to undo the history of identities (“primacy of the lines of flight”) and to deliver “blows” unforeseeable both to the sociologist and the militant. There also exists “a becoming-revolutionary that is not the same thing as the future of the revolution and that does not necessarily come from militants.”<sup>16</sup> *The constructions of the militant tend to be cut off from the “socio-cultural” expressions of the world and from the becoming-molecular of multiplicities—they tend to stop the forces in the process of becoming, to miss the multitudes.*

Badiou responds with *the theorem of the militant*, which states: “What grants power to a truth, and determines subjective fidelity, is the universal address of the relation to self instituted by the event, and not this relation itself” (SPe 90). This relationship being in “itself” the eventual rupture of the separation from the world and its “particularities,” *one requires the return of the decision* (decidere = to cut) *on the event in order to guarantee the transcendence of the Signifier, all the while filling the empty Subject with its unique content: its subjective fidelity to the event of separation in the universal communication*

<sup>15</sup> Lardreau, op. cit., 84. Commentary: the second-to-last term is, at the least, disputable; the last one, risible. The first two notions, on the other hand, are historically proven.

<sup>16</sup> Deleuze, *Dialogues*.

*of this subtractive foundation ...* In Pauline language, this zero degree of immanence is called love, understood as that of which faith is capable *in order to extract itself from the living autonomy of desire.*

It is thus, in the end, a matter of desire, of access to desire as a situation of *life from the perspective of sin* because the life of desire has been put under the condition of the transgression of the law, of the automatism of repetition which assigns the subject to the place of death ... Badiou highlights this point in his comments on the famous text of Paul (Rom. 7:7–23: *I had not known sin but by the law ...*), “Clearly, what is at issue here is nothing less than the problem of the unconscious” (SPe 79). On this point, one must concede to the Lacanizing philosopher. One does not acquiesce, however, without countering that “the problem” is nothing other than the priestly discourse of psychoanalysis that chains desire constituted as a lack in the Law [*manque à la Loi*] in order to impose upon the Subject, in the guise of subjectivation, the universal grace of its letter. How could it be otherwise, if it is *in the name of the unconscious* that the constructivism of desire is barred, in order to substitute in its stead the void of a truth *defined, index sui*, as “the only power that can be in accord with that of being”?

Whence the following outcome: if the universal is the metapolitical fantasy [*phantasme*] of the philosopher, psychoanalysis is his symptom, when his self-imposed condition is *to create the event of nothing destined for all.*

According to the rules laid out by the *Saint Paul*, the universalism of grace and the materialism of life let us attain the political fundament that governs the conflict between two paradigms of the multiple: “the multiplicity that, exceeding itself, sustains the universality” of its letter; and the *exact opposite* [*là tout contre*], the creative function of an Outside that pushes through the middle, below and beside the signifying cuts, the living lines, the broken lines, the becomings of multiplicities—or *multitudes*—as “a line of flight or of variation that affects each system in preventing it from being homogeneous.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.